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**Weasel Word**

**Glossary of Grammatical and Rhetorical Terms**

Weasel words are "sly, cunning, and sneaky," says Kenneth G. Wilson. They "lack integrity, and they conceal the truth. In the end they say one thing but mean something quite different" (*The Columbia Guide to Standard American English*, 1993). (CSA-Archive/Getty Images)

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**Definition** A *weasel word* is a [modifying](https://www.thoughtco.com/modifier-in-grammar-1691400) [word](https://www.thoughtco.com/word-english-language-1692612) that undermines or contradicts the [meaning](https://www.thoughtco.com/meaning-semantics-term-1691373) of the word, phrase, or clause it accompanies, such as "*genuine* replica." Also known as a *weaselism*.

More broadly, *weasel word* may refer to any word that's used with the intention to mislead or misinform.

The term was coined by author Stewart Chaplin in 1900 and popularized by Theodore Roosevelt in a speech in 1916.

See Examples and Observations below. Also see:

* [**What Are Weasel Words?**](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-are-weasel-words-1692698)
* [Blurred Word](http://grammar.about.com/od/ab/g/Blurred-Word.htm)
* [Diction](https://www.thoughtco.com/diction-words-term-1690466)
* [A Dictionary of Phony Phrases](https://www.thoughtco.com/phrop-words-and-meanings-1691511)
* [Doublespeak](https://www.thoughtco.com/doublespeak-language-term-1690475)
* [Gobbledygook](https://www.thoughtco.com/gobbledygook-language-term-1690903)
* [Hedge Words](https://www.thoughtco.com/verbal-hedge-communication-1692585)
* [Language at *-ese*: Academese, Legalese, and Other Species of Gobbledygook](https://www.thoughtco.com/writers-on-writing-e-b-white-1692831)
* [Mystification](https://www.thoughtco.com/mystification-language-term-1691412)
* [Soft Language](https://www.thoughtco.com/soft-language-euphemism-1692111)
* [Totally Overworked Words: The Use and Abuse of Qualifiers and Intensifiers](https://www.thoughtco.com/totally-overworked-words-1692692)

**Examples and Observations**

* "In June, 1900, the *Century Magazine* published a story entitled 'The Stained Glass Political Platform,' by Stewart Chaplin, . . . and on page 235 these words occur:

*Why,* ***weasel words*** *are words that suck all the life out of the words next to them, just as a weasel sucks an egg and leaves the shell. If you heft the egg afterward it's as light as a feather, and not very filling when you're hungry, but a basketful of them would make quite a show, and would bamboozle the unwary.*

"This is the origin of the term Colonel [Theodore] Roosevelt has made famous."
(Herbert M. Lloyd, letter to *The New York Times*, June 3, 1916)

* **Help!**
"Consider the **weasel word** *help*. Help means 'aid' or 'assist' and nothing else. Yet as one author has observed, 'help' is the one single word which, in all the annals of advertising, has done the most to say something that couldn't be said. Because the word *help* is used to qualify, almost anything can be said after it. Thus we're exposed to ads for products that 'help keep us young,' 'help prevent cavities,' 'help keep our houses germ-free.' Consider for a moment how many times a day you hear or read phrases like these: helps stop, helps prevent, helps fight, helps overcome, helps you feel, helps you look."
(William H. Shaw, *Business Ethics: A Textbook with Cases*, 7th ed. Wadsworth, Cengage, 2011)
* **Faux Words**
"I love the word 'faux.' I first really learned to appreciate this word watching the home-shopping channels, which addicted me for many months. In their glamorous parlance, vinyl became faux leather and cut glass became faux diamonds. The word itself is deceptive; it doesn't look the way it sounds. And when you insert it before a noun, that noun ends up taking on the exact opposite meaning."
(Jeanne Cavelos, quoted by Lewis Burke Frumkes in *Favorite Words of Famous People*. Marion Street Press, 2011)

"First, faux research yields a faux answer to a clinical question. Then faux education assures that doctors everywhere hear about it, so they can write millions of prescriptions based on the faux information. Bribes and kickbacks sometimes grease the skids."
(Marcia Angell, *The Truth About the Drug Companies: How They Deceive Us and What to Do About It*. Random House, 2005)
* **So . . .**
"So. This piece is about how public figures and now members of the general public have started prefacing something they are about to say with the word 'so' when it is a packaged exercise in self-presentation. 'So' is the new 'look.' . . .

"There have always been words swilling around the cultural [lexicon](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-lexicon-1691231) signalling artifice and there are others around at the moment. Prefacing a package with 'I would like to say' or 'To be honest' are hardy perennials. But 'so' is the **weasel word** of the moment, spreading into general usage.

"Last Monday evening, a member of the public was interviewed on Radio 5 Live outside Buckingham Palace. Asked why she and her friend had come there, she began: 'So. We went out to dinner together and both received texts from our husbands at the same time saying that the royal baby was born.' 'So' has become a way for a person to begin delivery of a packaged account of themselves."
(Oliver James, “So, Here’s a Carefully Packaged Sentence That Shows Me in My Best Light.” *The Guardian* [UK], July 26, 2013)
* **Reportedly . . .**
"As an old *Time* writer, I immediately spotted, in two consecutive sentences, the **weasel-word** 'reportedly,' the *Time*-honored hedge against the possibility that the facts in a given sentence might not hold up to reasonable scrutiny."
(John Gregory Dunne, "Your Time Is My Time." *The New York Review of Books*, April 23, 1992)
* **Arguably . . .**
"**Weasel words** also occur in [arguments](https://www.thoughtco.com/argument-rhetoric-and-composition-1689131). Consider the following:

Since paying a worker the current minimum wage is arguably the same as having a slave, and since slavery is illegal under the Constitution, the current minimum wage ought to be outlawed.

All this seems fairly straightforward until we look closer at the little weasel word 'arguably.' To give an argument is not necessarily to give a *good* argument."
(Malcolm Murray and Nebojsa Kujundzic, *Critical Reflection: A Textbook for Critical Thinking*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005)

* "To conservative [rhetors](https://www.thoughtco.com/rhetor-definition-1692059) in Congress, whatever is not blandly or angrily populist is *elitist*. In their resort to this **weasel word**, the patriotically correct on the right are as bad as the politically correct on the residual left."
(Robert Hughes, "Pulling the Fuse on Culture." *Time*, Aug. 7, 1995)
* "There are . . . [understatements](https://www.thoughtco.com/understatement-figure-of-speech-1692570) to avoid the truth, such as 'economic adjustment' for recession. There are broad abstractions for an unacceptable term or idea: 'downsizing' for slashing employment, masking words such as 'preowned' for used, and PC [euphemisms](https://www.thoughtco.com/euphemism-words-term-1690680) such as 'economic deprivation' for being poor."
(Paul Wasserman and Don Hausrath, *Weasel Words: The Dictionary of American Doublespeak*. Capital Books, 2006)

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